

THE EARTHLY PARADISE
IN TWELVE PARTS

THE EARTHLY
PARADISE: A POEM
BY WILLIAM MORRIS

PART X

THE GOLDEN APPLES

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

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THE EARTHLY PARADISE

DECEMBER

DEAD lonely night and all streets quiet now,
Thin o'er the moon the hindmost cloud swims past
Of that great rack that brought us up the snow;
On earth strange shadows o'er the snow are cast;
Pale stars, bright moon, swift cloud make heaven so vast
That earth left silent by the wind of night
Seems shrunken 'neath the grey unmeasured height.

Ah! through the hush the looked-for midnight clangs!
And then, e'en while its last stroke's solemn drone
In the cold air by unlit windows hangs,
Out break the bells above the year foredone,
Change, kindness lost, love left unloved alone;
Till their despairing sweetness makes thee deem
Thou once wert loved, if but amidst a dream.

O thou who clingest still to life and love,
Though nought of good, no God thou mayst discern,
Though nought that is, thine utmost woe can move,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Though no soul knows wherewith thine heart doth
yearn,

Yet, since thy weary lips no curse can learn,

Cast no least thing thou lovedst once away,

Since yet perchance thine eyes shall see the day.

DECEMBER

DECEMBER came, with mirth men needs must
make

E'en for the empty days and leisures' sake
That earth's cold leaden sleep doth bring; so there
Our elders sat within the guest-hall fair,
Not looking older for the snow without;
Cheery enough; remembering not old doubt,
A gnawing pain once, grown too hard to bear,
And so cast by; not thinking of old fear,
That conquering once, e'en with its victory
Must fade away, and, like all things else, die;
Not thinking of much else than that they had
Enough of life to make them somewhat glad
When all went well with them.

Now so it fell
That mariners were there, who 'gan to tell
Mishaps betid upon the winter seas,
Which set some younger men amidst of these
To ask the Wanderers of their voyage vain,
As knowing scarce the tale thereof. Small pain
It gave them now to answer: yet belike
On the old men, their hosts, the thing did strike
In jarring wise, this turning o'er and o'er
Of memories once so bitter sharp and sore:
Wherefore at last an elder said, "Let be,
My masters! if about the troublous sea

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Ye needs must hear, hearken a tale once told
By kin of ours in the dim days of old,
Whose thoughts when turning to a peaceful home
Unto this very west of ours must come—
—Scarce causelessly meseems when all is said,
And I remember that years bow my head,
And not the trouble of those days of war,
Of loss and wrong that in old stories are.”

THE GOLDEN APPLES

ARGUMENT

THIS tale tells of the voyage of a ship of Tyre, that, against the will of the shipmen, bore Hercules to an unknown land of the West, that he might accomplish a task laid on him by the Fates.

AS many as the leaves fall from the tree,
From the world's life the years are fallen away
Since King Eurystheus sat in majesty
In fair Mycenæ; midmost of whose day
It once befell that in a quiet bay
A ship of Tyre was swinging nigh the shore,
Her folk for sailing handling rope and oar.

Fresh was the summer morn, a soft wind stole
Down from the sheep-browsed slopes the cliffs that
crowned,
And ruffled lightly the long gleaming roll
Of the peaceful sea, and bore along the sound
Of shepherd-folk and sheep and questing hound;
For in the first dip of the hillside there
Lay bosomed 'midst its trees a homestead fair.

Amid regrets for last night, when the moon,
Risen on the soft dusk, shone on maidens' feet

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Brushing the gold-heart lilies to the tune
Of pipes complaining, o'er the grass down-beat
That mixed with dewy flowers its odour sweet,
The shipmen laboured, till the sail unfurled
Swung round the prow to meet another world.

But ere the anchor had come home, a shout
Rang from the strand, as though the ship were hailed.
Whereat the master bade them stay, in doubt
That they without some needful thing had sailed ;
When, lo ! from where the cliffs' steep grey sides failed
Into a ragged stony slip, came twain
Who seemed in haste the ready keel to gain.

Soon they drew nigh, and he who first came down
Unto the surf was a man huge of limb,
Grey-eyed, with crisp-curved hair 'twixt black and
brown,
Who had a lion's skin cast over him,
So wrought with gold that the fell showed but dim
Betwixt the threads, and in his hand he bore
A mighty club with bands of steel done o'er.

Panting there followed him a grey old man,
Bearing a long staff, clad in gown of blue,
Feeble of aspect, hollow-cheeked and wan,
Who when unto his fellow's side he drew,
Said faintly : " Now, do that which thou shouldst do ;
This is the ship." Then in the other's eye
A smile gleamed, and he spake out merrily :

THE GOLDEN APPLES

“Masters, folk tell me that ye make for Tyre,
And after that still nearer to the sun;
And since Fate bids me look to die by fire,
Fain am I, ere my worldly day be done,
To know what from earth’s hottest can be won;
And this old man, my kinsman, would with me.
How say ye, will ye bear us o’er the sea?”

“What is thy name?” the master said: “And know
That we are merchants, and for nought give nought;
What wilt thou pay?—thou seem’st full rich, I trow.”
The old man muttered, stooped adown and caught
At something in the sand: “E’en so I thought,”
The younger said, “when I set out from home—
As to my name, perchance in days to come

“Thou shalt know that—but have heed, take this toy,
And call me the Strong Man.” And as he spake
The master’s deep-brown eyes ’gan gleam with joy,
For from his arm a huge ring did he take,
And cast it on the deck, where it did break
A water-jar, and in the wet shards lay
Golden, and gleaming like the end of day.

But the old man held out a withered hand,
Wherein there shone two pearls most great and fair,
And said, “If any nigher I might stand,
Then might’st thou see the things I give thee here—
And for my name—a many names I bear,
But call me Shepherd of the Shore this tide,
And for more knowledge with a good will bide.”

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

From one to other turned the master's eyes ;
The Strong Man laughed as at some hidden jest,
And wild doubts in the shipman's heart did rise ;
But thinking on the thing, he deemed it best
To bid them come aboard, and take such rest
As they might have of the untrusty sea,
'Mid men who trusty fellows still should be.

Then no more words the Strong Man made, but
straight
Caught up the elder in his arms, and so,
Making no whit of all that added weight,
Strode to the ship, right through the breakers low,
And catching at the rope that they did throw
Out toward his hand, swung up into the ship :
Then did the master let the hawser slip.

The shapely prow cleft the wet mead and green,
And wondering drew the shipmen round to gaze
Upon those limbs, the mightiest ever seen ;
And many deemed it no light thing to face
The splendour of his eyen, though they did blaze
With no wrath now, no hate for them to dread,
As seaward 'twixt the summer isles they sped.

Freshened the wind, but ever fair it blew
Unto the south-east ; but as failed the land,
Unto the plunging prow the Strong Man drew,
And silent, gazing with wide eyes did stand,
As though his heart found rest ; but 'mid the band
Of shipmen in the stern the old man sat,
Telling them tales that no man there forgot.

THE GOLDEN APPLES

As one who had beheld, he told them there
Of the sweet singer, whom, for his song's sake,
The dolphins back from choking death did bear ;
How in the mid sea did the vine outbreak
O'er that ill bark when Bacchus 'gan to wake ;
How anigh Cyprus, ruddy with the rose
The cold sea grew as any June-loved close ;

While on the flowery shore all things alive
Grew faint with sense of birth of some delight,
And the nymphs waited trembling there, to give
Glad welcome to the glory of that sight :
He paused then, ere he told how, wild and white,
Rose ocean, breaking o'er a race accurst,
A world once good, now come unto its worst.

And then he smiled, and said, " And yet ye won,
Ye men, and tremble not on days like these,
Nor think with what a mind Prometheus' son
Beheld the last of the torn reeling trees
From high Parnassus : slipping through the seas
Ye never think, ye men-folk, how ye seem
From down below through the green waters' gleam."

Dusk was it now when these last words he said,
And little of his visage might they see,
But o'er their hearts stole vague and troublous dread,
They knew not why ; yet ever quietly
They sailed that night ; nor might a morning be
Fairer than was the next morn ; and they went
Along their due course after their intent.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

The fourth day, about sunrise, from the mast
The watch cried out he saw Phœnician land ;
Whereat the Strong Man on the elder cast
A look askance, and he straight took his stand
Anigh the prow, and gazed beneath his hand
Upon the low sun and the scarce-seen shore,
Till cloud-flecks rose, and gathered and drew o'er.

The morn grown cold ; then small rain 'gan to fall,
And all the wind dropped dead, and hearts of men
Sank, and their bark seemed helpless now and small ;
Then suddenly the wind 'gan moan again ;
Sails flapped, and ropes beat wild about ; and then
Down came the great east wind ; and the ship ran
Straining, heeled o'er, through seas all changed and wan.

Westward, scarce knowing night from day, they drave
Through sea and sky grown one ; the Strong Man
wrought
With mighty hands, and seemed a god to save ;
But on the prow, heeding all weather nought,
The elder stood, nor any prop he sought,
But swayed to the ship's wallowing, as on wings
He there were set above the wrack of things.

And westward still they drave ; and if they saw
Land upon either side, as on they sped,
'Twas but as faces in a dream may draw
Anigh, and fade, and leave nought in their stead ;
And in the shipmen's hearts grew heavy dread
To sick despair ; they deemed they should drive on
Till the world's edge and empty space were won.

THE GOLDEN APPLES

But 'neath the Strong Man's eyes e'en as they might
They toiled on still ; and he sang to the wind,
And spread his arms to meet the waters white,
As o'er the deck they tumbled, making blind
The brine-drenched shipmen ; nor with eye unkind
He gazed up at the lightning ; nor would frown
When o'er the wet waste Jove's bolt rattled down.

And they, who at the last had come to think
Their guests were very gods, with all their fear
Feared nought belike that their good ship would sink
Amid the storm ; but rather looked to hear
The last moan of the wind that them should bear
Into the windless stream of ocean grey,
Where they should float till dead was every day.

Yet their fear mocked them ; for the storm 'gan die
About the tenth day, though unto the west
They drave on still ; soon fair and quietly
The morn would break ; and though amid their rest
Nought but long evil wandering seemed the best
That they might hope for ; still, despite their dread,
Sweet was the quiet sea and goodlihead

Of the bright sun at last come back again ;
And as the days passed, less and less fear grew,
If without cause, till faded all their pain ;
And they 'gan turn unto their guests anew,
Yet durst ask nought of what that evil drew
Upon their heads ; or of returning speak.
Happy they felt, but listless, spent, and weak.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And now as at the first the elder was,
And sat and told them tales of yore ago ;
But still the Strong Man up and down would pass
About the deck, or on the prow alone
Would stand and stare out westward ; and still on
Through a fair summer sea they went, nor thought
Of what would come when these days turned to nought.

And now when twenty days were well passed o'er
They made a new land ; cloudy mountains high
Rose from the sea at first ; then a green shore
Spread fair below them : as they drew anigh
No sloping, stony strand could they espy,
And no surf breaking ; the green sea and wide
Wherethrough they slipped was driven by no tide.

Dark fell ere they might set their eager feet
Upon the shore ; but night-long their ship lay
As in a deep stream, by the blossoms sweet
That flecked the grass whence flowers ne'er passed away.
But when the cloud-barred east brought back the day,
And turned the western mountain-tops to gold,
Fresh fear the shipmen in their bark did hold.

For as a dream seemed all ; too fair for those
Who needs must die ; moreover they could see,
A furlong off, 'twixt apple-tree and rose,
A brazen wall that gleamed out wondrously
In the young sun, and seemed right long to be ;
And memory of all marvels lay upon
Their shrinking hearts now this sweet place was won.

THE GOLDEN APPLES

But when unto the nameless guests they turned,
Who stood together nigh the plank shot out
Shoreward, within the Strong Man's eyes there burned
A wild light, as the other one in doubt
He eyed a moment ; then with a great shout
Leaped into the blossomed grass ; the echoes rolled
Back from the hills, harsh still and over-bold.

Slowly the old man followed him, and still
The crew held back : they knew now they were brought
Over the sea the purpose to fulfil
Of these strange men ; and in their hearts they thought,
"Perchance we yet shall live, if, meddling nought
With dreams, we bide here till these twain come back ;
But prying eyes the fire-blast seldom lack."

Yet 'mongst them were two fellows bold and young,
Who, looking each upon the other's face,
Their hearts to meet the unknown danger strung,
And went ashore, and at a gentle pace
Followed the strangers, who unto the place
Where the wall gleamed had turned ; peace and desire
Mingled together in their hearts, as nigher

They drew unto that wall, and dulled their fear :
Fair wrought it was, as though with bricks of brass ;
And images upon its face there were,
Stories of things a long while come to pass :
Nor that alone—as looking in a glass
Its maker knew the tales of what should be,
And wrought them there for bird and beast to see.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

So on they went; the many birds sang sweet
Through all that blossomed thicket from above,
And unknown flowers bent down before their feet;
The very air, cleft by the grey-winged dove,
Throbb'd with sweet scent, and smote their souls
with love.

Slowly they went till those twain stayed before
A strangely-wrought and iron-covered door.

They stayed, too, till o'er noise of wind, and bird,
And falling flower, there rang a mighty shout
As the Strong Man his steel-bound club upreared,
And drave it 'gainst the hammered iron stout,
Where 'neath his blows flew bolt and rivet out,
Till shattered on the ground the great door lay,
And into the guarded place bright poured the day.

The Strong Man entered, but his fellow stayed,
Leaning against a tree-trunk as they deemed.
They faltered now, and yet all things being weighed
Went on again; and thought they must have dreamed
Of the old man, for now the sunlight streamed
Full on the tree he had been leaning on,
And him they saw not go, yet was he gone:

Only a slim green lizard fitted there
Amidst the dry leaves; him they noted nought,
But trembling, through the doorway 'gan to peer,
And still of strange and dreadful saw not aught,
Only a garden fair beyond all thought.
And there, 'twixt sun and shade, the Strong Man went
On some long-sought-for end belike intent.

THE GOLDEN APPLES

They 'gan to follow down a narrow way
Of green-sward that the lilies trembled o'er,
And whereon thick the scattered rose-leaves lay;
But a great wonder weighed upon them sore,
And well they thought they should return no more,
Yet scarce a pain that seemed; they looked to meet
Before they died things strange and fair and sweet.

So still to right and left the Strong Man thrust
The blossomed boughs, and passed on steadily,
As though his hardy heart he well did trust,
Till in a while he gave a joyous cry,
And hastened on, as though the end drew nigh;
And women's voices then they deemed they heard,
Mixed with a noise that made desire afraid.

Yet through sweet scents and sounds on did they bear
Their panting hearts, till the path ended now
In a wide space of green, a streamlet clear
From out a marble basin there did flow,
And close by that a slim-trunked tree did grow,
And on a bough low o'er the water cold
There hung three apples of red-gleaming gold.

About the tree, new risen e'en now to meet
The shining presence of that mighty one,
Three damsels stood, naked from head to feet
Save for the glory of their hair, where sun
And shadow flickered, while the wind did run
Through the grey leaves o'erhead, and shook the grass
Where nigh their feet the wandering bee did pass.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

But 'midst their delicate limbs and all around
The tree-roots, gleaming blue black could they see
The spires of a great serpent, that, enwound
About the smooth bole, looked forth threateningly,
With glittering eyes and raised crest, o'er the three
Fair heads fresh crowned, and hissed above the speech
Wherewith they murmured softly each to each.

Now the Strong Man amid the green space stayed,
And, leaning on his club, with eager eyes
But brow yet smooth, in voice yet friendly said :
"O daughters of old Hesperus the Wise,
Well have ye held your guard here ; but time tries
The very will of gods, and to my hand
Must give this day the gold fruit of your land."

Then spake the first maid—sweet as the west wind
Amidst of summer noon her sweet voice was :
"Ah, me ! what knows this place of changing mind
Of men or gods ; here shall long ages pass,
And clean forget thy feet upon the grass,
Thy hapless bones amid the fruitful mould ;
Look at thy death envenomed swift and cold !"

Hiding new flowers, the dull coils, as she spake,
Moved near her limbs : but then the second one,
In such a voice as when the morn doth wake
To song of birds, said, "When the world foredone
Has moaned its last, still shall we dwell alone
Beneath this bough, and have no tales to tell
Of things deemed great that on the earth befell."

THE GOLDEN APPLES

Then spake the third, in voice as of the flute
That wakes the maiden to her wedding morn :
“If any god should gain our golden fruit,
Its curse would make his deathless life forlorn.
Lament thou, then, that ever thou wert born ;
Yet all things, changed by joy or loss or pain,
To what they were shall change and change again.”

“So be it,” he said, “the Fates that drive me on
Shall slay me or shall save ; blessing or curse
That followeth after when the thing is won
Shall make my work no better now nor worse ;
And if it be that the world’s heart must nurse
Hatred against me, how then shall I choose
To leave or take ?—let your dread servant loose !”

E’en therewith, like a pillar of black smoke,
Swift, shifting ever, drave the worm at him ;
In deadly silence now that nothing broke,
Its folds were writhing round him trunk and limb,
Until his glittering gear was nought but dim
E’en in that sunshine, while his head and side
And breast the fork-tongued, pointed muzzle tried.

Closer the coils drew, quicker all about
The forked tongue darted, and yet stiff he stood,
E’en as an oak that sees the straw flare out
And lick its ancient bole for little good :
Until the godlike fury of his mood
Burst from his heart in one great shattering cry,
And rattling down the loosened coils did lie ;

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And from the torn throat and crushed dreadful head
Forth flowed a stream of blood along the grass ;
Bright in the sun he stood above the dead,
Panting with fury ; yet as ever was
The wont of him, soon did his anger pass,
And with a happy smile at last he turned
To where the apples o'er the water burned.

Silent and moveless ever stood the three ;
No change came o'er their faces, as his hand
Was stretched aloft unto the sacred tree ;
Nor shrank they aught aback, though he did stand
So close that tresses of their bright hair, fanned
By the sweet garden breeze, lay light on him,
And his gold fell brushed by them breast and limb.

He drew adown the wind-stirred bough, and took
The apples thence ; then let it spring away,
And from his brow the dark hair backward shook,
And said : " O sweet, O fair, and shall this day
A curse upon my life henceforward lay—
This day alone ? Methinks of coming life
Somewhat I know, with all its loss and strife.

" But this I know, at least : the world shall wend
Upon its way, and, gathering joy and grief
And deeds done, bear them with it to the end ;
So shall it, though I lie as last year's leaf
Lies 'neath a summer tree, at least receive
My life gone by, and store it, with the gain
That men alive call striving, wrong, and pain.

THE GOLDEN APPLES

“So for my part I rather bless than curse,
And bless this fateful land ; good be with it ;
Nor for this deadly thing’s death is it worse,
Nor for the lack of gold ; still shall ye sit
Watching the swallow o’er the daisies flit ;
Still shall your wandering limbs ere day is done
Make dawn desired by the sinking sun.

“And now, behold ! in memory of all this
Take ye this girdle that shall waste and fade
As fadeth not your fairness and your bliss,
That when hereafter ’mid the blossoms laid
Ye talk of days and men now nothing made,
Ye may remember how the Theban man,
The son of Jove, came o’er the waters wan.”

Their faces changed not aught for all they heard ;
As though all things now fully told out were,
They gazed upon him without any word :
Ah ! craving kindness, hope, or loving care,
Their fairness scarcely could have made more fair
As with the apples folded in his fell
He went, to do more deeds for folk to tell.

Now as the girdle on the ground was cast
Those fellows turned and hurried toward the door,
And as across its broken leaves they passed
The old man saw they not, e’en as before ;
But an unearthed blind mole bewildered sore
Was wandering there in fruitless, aimless wise,
That got small heed from their full-sated eyes.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Swift gat they to their anxious folk ; nor had
More time than just to say, " Be of good cheer,
For in our own land may we yet be glad,"
When they beheld the guests a-drawing near ;
And much bewildered the two fellows were
To see the old man, and must even deem
That they should see things stranger than a dream.

But when they were aboard the elder cried,
" Up sails, my masters, fair now is the wind ;
Nor good it is too long here to abide,
Lest what ye may not loose your souls should bind."
And as he spake, the tall trees left behind
Stirred with the rising land-wind, and the crew,
Joyous thereat, the hawsers shipward drew.

Swift sped the ship, and glad at heart were all,
And the Strong Man was merry with the rest,
And from the elder's lips no word did fall
That did not seem to promise all the best ;
Yet with a certain awe were men oppressed,
And felt as if their inmost hearts were bare,
And each man's secret babbled through the air.

Still oft the old man sat with them and told
Tales of past time, as on the outward way ;
And now would they the face of him behold
And deem it changed ; the years that on him lay
Seemed to grow nought, and no more wan and grey
He looked, but ever glorious, wise and strong,
As though no lapse of time for him were long.

THE GOLDEN APPLES

At last, when six days through the kindly sea
Their keel had slipped, he said : “ Come hearken now,
For so it is that things fare wondrously
E’en in these days ; and I a tale can show
That, told by you unto your sons, shall grow
A marvel of the days that are to come :
Take heed and tell it when ye reach your home.

“ Yet living in the world a man there is
Men call the Theban King Amphitryon’s son,
Although perchance a greater sire was his ;
But certainly his lips have hung upon
Alcmena’s breasts : great deeds this man hath won
Already, for his name is Hercules,
And e’en ye Asian folk have heard of these.

“ Now ere the moon, this eve in his last wane,
Was born, this Hercules, the fated thrall
Of King Eurystheus, was straight bid to gain
Gifts from a land whereon no foot doth fall
Of mortal man, beyond the misty wall
Of unknown waters ; pensively he went
Along the sea on his hard life intent.

“ And at the dawn he came into a bay
Where the sea, ebbd far down, left wastes of sand,
Walled from the green earth by great cliffs and grey ;
Then he looked up, and wondering there did stand,
For strange things lay in slumber on the strand ;
Strange counterparts of what the firm earth hath
Lay scattered all about his weary path :

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

“Sea-lions and sea-horses and sea-kine,
Sea-boars, sea-men strange-skinned, of wondrous hair;
And in their midst a man who seemed divine
For changeless eld, and round him women fair,
Clad in the sea-webs glassy green and clear
With gems on head and girdle, limb and breast,
Such as earth knoweth not among her best.

“A moment at the fair and wondrous sight
He stared, then, since the heart in him was good,
He went about with careful steps and light
Till o’er the sleeping sea-god now he stood;
And if the white-foot maids had stirred his blood
As he passed by, now other thoughts had place
Within his heart when he beheld that face.

“For Nereus now he knew, who knows all things;
And to himself he said, ‘If I prevail,
Better than by some god-wrought eagle-wings
Shall I be holpen;’ then he cried out: ‘Hail,
O Nereus! lord of shifting hill and dale!
Arise and wrestle; I am Hercules!
Not soon now shalt thou meet the ridgy seas.’

“And mightily he cast himself on him;
And Nereus cried out shrilly; and straightway
That sleeping crowd, fair maid with half-hid limb,
Strange man and green-haired beast, made no delay,
But glided down into the billows grey,
And, by the lovely sea embraced, were gone,
While they two wrestled on the sea strand lone.

THE GOLDEN APPLES

“Soon found the sea-god that his bodily might
Was nought in dealing with Jove’s dear one there ;
And soon he ’gan to use his magic sleight :
Into a lithe leopard, and a hugging bear
He turned him ; then the smallest fowl of air
The straining arms of Hercules must hold,
And then a mud-born wriggling eel and cold.

“Then as the firm hands mastered this, forth brake
A sudden rush of waters all around,
Blinding and choking : then a thin green snake
With golden eyes ; then o’er the shell-strewn ground
Forth stole a fly the least that may be found ;
Then earth and heaven seemed wrapped in one huge
flame,
But from the midst thereof a voice there came :

“ ‘Kinsman and stout-heart, thou hast won the day,
Nor to my grief : what wouldst thou have of me ?’
And therewith to an old man small and grey
Faded the roaring flame, who wearily
Sat down upon the sand and said, ‘Let be !
I know thy tale ; worthy of help thou art ;
Come now, a short way hence will there depart

“ ‘A ship of Tyre for the warm southern seas,
Come we a-board ; according to my will
Her way shall be.’ Then up rose Hercules,
Merry of face, though hot and panting still ;
But the fair summer day his heart did fill
With all delight ; and so forth went the twain,
And found those men desirous of all gain.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

“ Ah, for these gainful men—somewhat indeed
Their sails are rent, their bark beat ; kin and friend
Are wearying for them ; yet a friend in need
They yet shall gain, if at their journey’s end,
Upon the last ness where the wild goats wend
To lick the salt-washed stones, a house they raise
Bedight with gold in kindly Nereus’ praise.”

Breathless they waited for these latest words,
That like the soft wind of the gathering night
Were grown to be : about the mast flew birds
Making their moan, hovering long-winged and white ;
And now before their straining anxious sight
The old man faded out into the air,
And from his place flew forth a sea-mew fair.

Then to the Mighty Man, Alcmena’s son,
With yearning hearts they turned till he should speak,
And he spake softly : “ Nought ill have ye done
In helping me to find what I did seek :
The world made better by me knows if weak
My hand and heart are : but now, light the fire
Upon the prow and worship the grey sire.”

So did they ; and such gifts as there they had
Gave unto Nereus ; yea, and sooth to say,
Amid the tumult of their hearts made glad,
Had honoured Hercules in e’en such way ;
But he laughed out amid them, and said, “ Nay,
Not yet the end is come ; nor have I yet
Bowed down before vain longing and regret.

THE GOLDEN APPLES

“It may be—who shall tell, when I go back
There whence I came, and looking down behold
The place that my once eager heart shall lack,
And all my dead desires a-lying cold,
But I may have the might then to enfold
The hopes of brave men in my heart?—but long
Life lies before first with its change and wrong.”

So fair along the watery ways they sped
In happy wise, nor failed of their return;
Nor failed in ancient Tyre the ways to tread,
Teaching their tale to whomsoe'er would learn,
Nor failed at last the flesh of beasts to burn
In Nereus' house, turned toward the bright day's end
On the last ness, round which the wild goats wend.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

HE made an end, and gazed about the place,
With rest enow upon his ancient face,
And smiling ; but to some the tale did seem
Like to the middle of some pleasant dream,
Which, waked from, leaves upon the troubled mind
A sense of something ill that lurked behind,
If morn had given due time to dream it out.

Yet as the women stirred, and went about
The board with flask and beaker, and the scent
Of their soft raiment 'mid the feasters went,
The hill-side sun of autumn-tide at least
Seemed to come back unto their winter feast ;
Rest, half remembering time past, did they win,
And somewhat surely wrought the tale therein.

DECEMBER

IN late December shone the westering sun
Through frosty haze of the day nearly done,
Without the hall wherein our elders were :
Within, the firelight gleamed on raiment fair,
And heads far fairer ; because youth and maid
Midwinter words of hope that day had said
Before the altars ; and were come at last,
No worse for snowy footways over-past,
Or for the east wind upon cheek and brow,
Their fairness to the ancient folk to show ;
And, dance and song being done, at end of day,
With ears pricked up, amid the furs they lay,
To have reward of tale for sound and sight
So given erewhile.

The flickering firelight,
And the late sun still streaming through the haze,
Made the hall meet enow for tale of days
So long past over : nigh the cheery flame
A wanderer sat, and a long sunbeam came
On to his knees, then to the hearth fell down.
There in the silence, with thin hands and brown
Folded together, and a dying smile
Upon his face, he sat a little while,
Then somewhat raised his bright eyes, and began
To name his people's best beloved man.

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

ARGUMENT

ASLAUG, the daughter of Sigurd who slew the Dragon, and of Brynhild whom he loved, lost all her friends and kin, and was nourished amid great misery ; yet in the end her fortune, her glory, and her beauty prevailed, and she came to mighty estate.

A FAIR tale might I tell to you
Of Sigurd, who the dragon slew
Upon the murder-wasted heath,
And how love led him unto death,
Through strange wild ways of joy and pain ;
Then such a story should ye gain,
If I could tell it all aright,
As well might win you some delight
From out the woofullest of days ;
But now have I no heart to raise
That mighty sorrow laid asleep,
That love so sweet, so strong and deep,
That as ye hear the wonder told
In those few strenuous words of old,
The whole world seems to rend apart
When heart is torn away from heart.
But the world lives still, and to-day

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

The green Rhine wendeth on its way
Over the unseen golden curse
That drew its lord to worse and worse,
Till that last dawn in Atli's hall,
When the red flame flared over all,
Lighting the leaden, sunless sea.

Yet so much told of this must be,
That Sigurd, while his youth was bright
And unstained, 'midst the first delight
Of Brynhild's love—that him did gain
All joy, all woe, and very bane—
Begot on her a woman-child.
In hope she bore the maid, and smiled
When of its father's face she thought;
But when sad time the change had brought,
And she to Gunnar's house must go,
She, thinking how she might bestow
The memory of that lovely eve,
That morn o'er-sweet, the child did leave
With Heimir, her old foster-sire,
A mighty lord; then, with the fire
Of her old love still smouldering,
And brooding over many a thing,
She went unto her life and death.
Nought, as I said, the story saith
Of all the wrong and love that led
Her feet astray: together dead
They lie now on their funeral pile,
And now the little one doth smile
Upon the glittering war-array

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Of the men come the sooth to say
To Heimir of that bitter end.

Silent he stared till these did wend
Into the hall to fire and board,
Then by the porch without a word
Long time he sat : then he arose
And drew his sword, and hard and close
Gazed on the thin-worn edge, and said :
“Smooth cheeks, sweet hands, and art thou dead ?
O me thy glory ! Woe is me !
I thought once more thine eyes to see—
Had I been young three years ago,
When thou a maiden burd-alone,
Hadst eighteen summers !”

As he spake,
He gat him swiftly to the brake
Of thorn-trees nigh his house : and some,
When calm once more he sat at home,
Deemed he had wept : but no word more
He spake thereof.

A few days wore,
And now alone he oft would be
Within his smithy ; heedfully
He guarded it, that none came in ;
Nor marvelled men ; “For he doth win
Some work of craftsmanship,” said they,
“And such before on many a day
Hath been his wont.”

So it went on
That a long while he wrought alone ;
But on the tenth day bore in there

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

Aslaug, the little maiden fair,
Three winters old ; and then the thing
A little set folk marvelling ;
Yet none the less in nought durst they
To watch him. So to end of day
Time drew, and still unto the hall
He came not, and a dread 'gan fall
Upon his household, lest some ill
The quiet of their lives should kill ;
And so it fell that the next morn
They found them of their lord forlorn,
And Aslaug might they see no more ;
Wide open was the smithy door,
The forge a-cold, and hammering tools
Lay on the floor, with woodwright's rules,
And chips and shavings of hard wood.
Moreover, when they deemed it good
To seek for him, nought might they do,
The tale says, for so dark it grew
Over all ways, that no man might
Know the green meads from water white.
So back they wended sorrowfully,
And still most like it seemed to be,
That Odin had called Heimir home ;
And nothing strange it seemed to some
That with him the sweet youngling was,
Since Brynhild's love might bring to pass
E'en mightier things than this, they said,
And sure the little gold-curled head,
The pledge of all her earthly weal,
In Freyia's house she longed to feel.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Further the way was than they deemed
Unto that rest whereof they dreamed
Both to the greybeard and the child ;
For now by trodden way and wild
Goes Heimir long : wide-faced is he,
Thin-cheeked, hook-nosed, e'en as might be
An ancient erne ; his hair falls down
From 'neath a wide slouched hat of brown,
And mingles white with his white beard ;
A broad brown brand, most men have feared,
Hangs by his side, and at his back
Is slung a huge harp, that doth lack
All fairness certes, and so great
It is, that few might bear its weight ;
Yea, Heimir even, somewhat slow
Beneath its burden walketh now,
And looketh round, and stayeth soon.

On a calm sunny afternoon,
Within a cleared space of a wood,
At last the huge old warrior stood
And peered about him doubtfully ;
Who, when nought living he might see,
But mid the beech-boughs high aloft
A blue-winged jay, and squirrel soft,
And in the grass a watchful hare,
Unslung his harp and knelt down there
Beside it, and a little while
Handled the hollow with a smile
Of cunning, and behold, the thing
Opened, as by some secret spring,

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

And there within the hollow lay,
Clad in gold-fringed well-wrought array,
Aslaug, the golden-headed child,
Asleep and rosy ; but she smiled
As Heimir's brown hand drew a-near,
And woke up free from any fear,
And stretched her hands out towards his face.

He sat him down in the green place,
With kind arms round the little one,
Till, fully waked now, to the sun
She turned, and babbling, 'gainst his breast
Her dimpled struggling hands she pressed :
His old lips touched those eyes of hers,
That Sigurd's hope and Brynhild's tears
Made sad e'en in her life's first spring ;
Then sweet her chuckling laugh did ring,
As down amid the flowery grass
He set her, and beheld her pass
From flower to flower in utter glee ;
Therewith he reached out thoughtfully,
And cast his arms around the harp,
That at the first most strange and sharp
Rang through the still day, and the child
Stopped, startled by that music wild :
But then a change came o'er the strings,
As, tinkling sweet, of merry things
They seemed to tell, and to and fro
Danced Aslaug, till the tune did grow
Fuller and stronger, sweeter still,
And all the woodland place did fill
With sound, not merry now nor sad,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

But sweet, heart-raising, as it had
The gathered voice of that fair day
Amidst its measured strains; her play
Amid the flowers grew slower now,
And sadder did the music grow,
And yet still sweeter: and with that,
Nigher to where the old man sat
Aslaug 'gan move, until at last
All sound from the strained strings there passed
As into each other's eyes they gazed;
Then, sighing, the young thing he raised,
And set her softly on his knee,
And laid her round cheek pitifully
Unto his own, and said:

“Indeed,
Of such as I shalt thou have need,
As swift the troubled days wear by,
And yet I know full certainly
My life on earth shall not be long:
And those who think to better wrong
By working wrong shall seek thee wide
To slay thee; yea, belike they ride
E'en now unto my once-loved home.
Well, to a void place shall they come,
And I for thee thus much have wrought—
For thee and Brynhild—yea, and nought
I deem it still to turn my face
Each morn unto some unknown place
Like a poor churl—for, ah! who knows
Upon what wandering wind that blows
Drives Brynhild's spirit through the air;

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

And now by such road may I fare
That we may meet ere many days."

Again the youngling did he raise
Unto his face, for to the earth
Had she slipped down; her babbling mirth
Had mingled with his low deep speech;
But now, as she her hand did reach
Unto his beard, nor stinted more
Her babble, did a change come o'er
His face; for through the windless day
Afar a mighty horn did bray;
Then from beneath his cloak he drew
A golden phial, and set it to
Her ruddy lips in haste, and she
Gazed at him awhile fearfully,
As though she knew he was afraid;
But silently the child he laid
In the harp's hollow place, for now
Drowsy and drooping did she grow
'Neath the strong potion; hastily
He shut the harp, and raised it high
Upon his shoulder, set his sword
Ready to hand, and with no word
Stalked off along the forest glade;
But muttered presently:

"Afraid

Is a strange word for me to say;
But all is changed in a short day,
And full of death the world seems grown.
Mayhap I shall be left alone

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

When all are dead beside, to dream
Of happy life that once did seem
So stirring 'midst the folk I loved.
Ah! is there nought that may be moved
By strong desire? yea, nought that rules
The very gods who thrust earth's fools,
This way and that as foolishly,
For aught I know thereof, as I
Deal with the chess when I am drunk?"

His head upon his breast was sunk
For a long space, and then again
He spake: "My life is on the wane;
Somewhat of this I yet may learn
Ere long; yet I am fain to earn
My rest by reaching Atli's land;
For surely 'neath his mighty hand
Safe from the Niblungs shall she be,
Safe from the forge of misery,
Grimhild the Wise-wife."

As a goad
That name was to him; on he strode
Still swifter, silent. But day wore
As fast between the tree-stems hoar
He went his ways; belike it was
That he scarce knew if he did pass
O'er rough or smooth, by dark or light,
Until at last the very night
Had closed round him as thinner grew
The wood that he was hurrying through;
And as he gained a grey hill's brow

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

He felt the sea-breeze meet him now,
And heard the low surf's measured beat
Upon the beach. He stayed his feet,
And through the dusky gathering dark
Peered round and saw what seemed a spark
Along the hill's ridge ; thitherward
He turned, still warily on guard,
Until he came unto the door
Of some stead, lone belike and poor :
There knocking, was he bidden in,
And heedfully he raised the pin,
And entering stood with blinking gaze
Before a fire's unsteady blaze.

There sat a woman all alone
Whom some ten years would make a crone,
Yet would they little worsen her ;
Her face was sorely pinched with care,
Sour and thin-lipped she was ; of hue
E'en like a duck's foot ; whitish blue
Her eyes were, seeming as they kept
Wide open even when she slept.

She rose up, and was no less great
Than a tall man, a thing of weight
Was the gaunt hand that held a torch
As Heimir, midmost of the porch,
Fixed his deep grey and solemn eyes
Upon that wretched wife's surprise.

"Well," said she, "what may be your will?
Little we have your sack to fill,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

If on thieves' errand ye are come ;
But since the goodman is from home
I know of none shall say you nay
If ye have will to bear away
The goodwife."

As on a burned house
Grown cold, the moon shines dolorous
From out the rainy lift, so now
A laugh must crease her lip and brow.

"I am no thief, goodwife," he said,
"But ask wherein to lay my head
To-night."

"Well, goodman, sit," said she :
"Thine ugly box of minstrelsy
With thine attire befits not ill ;
And both belike may match thy skill."

So by the fire he sat him down,
And she too sat, and coarse and brown
The thread was that her rock gave forth
As there she spun ; of little worth
Was all the gear that hall did hold.

Now Heimir new-come from the cold
Had set his harp down by his side,
And, turning his grey eyes and wide
Away from hers, slouched down his hat
Yet farther o'er his brows, and sat
With hands outstretched unto the flame.
But had he noted how there came
A twinkle into her dead eyes,
He had been minded to arise,

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

Methinks ; for better company
The wild-wood wolf had been than she.
Because, from out the hodden grey
That was the great man's poor array,
Once and again could she behold
How that the gleam of ruddy gold
Came forth : so therewith she arose,
And, wandering round the hall, drew close
Unto the great harp, and could see
Some fringe of golden bravery
Hanging therefrom.—And the man too,
In spite of patch and clouted shoe,
And unadorned sword, seemed indeed
Scarce less than a great king in need,
So wholly noble was his mien.

So, with these things thus thought and seen,
Within her mind grew fell intent
As to and fro the hall she went,
And from the ark at last did take
Meal forth for porridge and for cake,
And to the fire she turned, and 'gan
To look still closer on the man
As with the girdle and the pot
She busied her, and doubted not
That on his arm a gold ring was ;
For presently, as she did pass,
Somewhat she brushed the cloak from him,
And saw the gold gleam nowise dim.
Then sure, if man might shape his fate,
Her greed impatient and dull hate
Within her eyes he might have seen,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And so this tale have never been.
But nought he heeded ; far away
His thoughts were.

Therewith did she lay
The meal upon the board, and said,
“Meseems ye would be well apaid
Of meat and drink, and it is here,
Fair lord—though somewhat sorry cheer ;
Fall to now.”

Whining, with a grin
She watched, as one who sets a gin,
If at the name of lord at all
He started, but no speech did fall
From his old lips, and wearily
He gat to meat, and she stood by,
And poured the drink to him, and said :

“To such a husband am I wed
That ill is speech with him, when he
Comes home foredone with drudgery ;
And though indeed I deem thee one
Who deeds of fame full oft hath done
And would not fear him, yet most ill
'Twould be the bliss of us to spill
In brawl with him, as might betide
If thou his coming shouldst abide.
Our barley barn is close hereby,
Wherein a weary man might lie
And be no worse at dawn of day.”

“Well, goodwife,” said he, “lead the way !
Worse lodging have I had than that,

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

Where the wolf howled unto the bat,
And red the woodland stream did run."

She started back, he seemed as one
Who might have come back from the dead
To wreak upon her evil head
Her sour ill life, but nought the more
He heeded her; "Go on before,"
He said, "for I am in no case
To-night to meet an angry face
And hold my hand from my good sword."

So out she passed without a word,
Though when he took in careful wise
The heavy harp, with greedy eyes
And an ill scowl she gazed thereon,
Yet durst say nought. But soon they won
Unto the barn's door—he turned round,
And, gazing down the rugged ground,
Beheld the sea wide reaching, white
Beneath the new-risen moon, and bright
His face waxed for a little while,
And on the still night did he smile,
As into the dark place he went,—
And saw no more of the grey bent,
Or sea, or sky, or morrow's sun.
Unless perchance when all is done,
And all the wrongs the gods have wrought
Come utterly with them to nought,
New heavens and earth he shall behold,
And peaceful folk, and days of gold,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

When Baldur is come back again
O'er an undying world to reign.

For when the carl came home that night,
In every ill wise that she might,
She egged him on their guest to slay
As sleeping in the barn he lay ;
And, since the man was no ill mate
For her, and heedless evil fate
Had made him big and strong enow,
He plucked up heart to strike the blow
Though but a coward thief he was.
So at the grey dawn did he pass
Unto the barn, and entered there ;
But through its dusk therewith did hear
The sound of harp-strings tinkling : then,
As is the wont of such-like men,
Great fear of ghosts fell on his heart ;
Yet, trembling sore, he thrust apart
The long stems of the barley-straw,
And, peering round about, he saw
Heimir asleep, his naked brand
Laid o'er his knees, but his right hand
Amid the harp-strings, whence there came
A mournful tinkling ; and some name
His lips seemed muttering, and withal
A strange sound on his ears did fall
As of a young child murmuring low
The muffled sounds of passing woe.
Nought dreadful saw he ; yet the hair
'Gan bristle on his head with fear,

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

And twice was he at point to turn
His bread by other craft to earn ;
But in the end prevailed in him
His raging greed 'gainst glimmerings dim
Of awe and pity ; which but wrought
In such wise in him that he thought
How good it were if all were done,
And day, and noise, and the bright sun
Were come again : he crept along,
Poising a spear, thick-shafted, strong,
In his right hand ; and ever fast
His heart beat as the floor he passed,
And o'er his shoulder gazed for fear
Once and again ; he raised the spear,
As Heimir's hand the string still pressed,
And thrust it through his noble breast,
Then turned and fled, and heard behind
A sound as of a wildered wind,
Half moan, half sigh ; then all was still.
But yet such fear his soul did fill
That he stayed not until he came
Into the hall, and cried the name
Of his wife, Grima, in high voice.

“ Ah well,” she said, “ what needs this noise ?
Can ye not see me here ?—Well then ? ”

“ Wife,” said he, “ of the sons of men
I deem him not, rather belike
Odin it was that I did strike.”

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

She laughed an ill laugh. "Well," she said,
"What then, if only he be dead?"

"What if he only seemed to die?"
He said, "and when night draweth nigh
Shall come again grown twice as great,
And eat where yesternight he ate?
For certes, wife, that harp of his,
No earthly minstrelsy it is,
Since as in sleep the man was laid
Of its own self a tune it played;
Yea, yea, and in a man's voice cried;
Belike a troll therein doth bide."

"An ugly, ill-made minstrel's tool,"
She said; "thou blundering, faint-heart fool!
Some wind moaned through the barn belike,
And the man's hand the strings did strike."

And yet she shivered as she spake,
As though some fear her heart did take,
And neither durst to draw anigh
The barn until the sun was high,
Then in they went together, and saw
The old man lying in the straw,
Scarce otherwise than if asleep,
Though in his heart the spear lay deep,
And round about the floor was red.
Then Grima went, and from the dead
Stripped off the gold ring, while the man
Stood still apart; then she began
To touch the harp, but in no wise

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

Might open it to reach the prize,
Wherefore she bade her husband bring
Edge-tools to split the cursed thing.
He brought them trembling, and the twain
Fell to, and soon their end did gain ;
But shrank back trembling to see there
The youngling, her grey eyes and clear
Wide open, fearless ; but the wife
Knew too much of her own sour life
To fear the other world o'ermuch,
And soon began to pull and touch
The golden raiment of the may ;
And at the last took heart to say :

“ Be comforted ! we shall not die ;
For no work is this certainly
Wrought in the country never seen,
But raiment of a Hunnish queen—
Gold seest thou, goodman ! gems seest thou !—
No ill work hast thou wrought I trow.
But, for the maiden, we must give
Victuals to her that she may live ;
For though to-day she is indeed
But one more mouth for us to feed,
Yet as she waxeth shall she do
Right many a thing to help us two ;
Yea, whatso hardest work there is,
That shall be hers—no life of bliss
Like sewing gold mid bower-mays ;
She shall be strong, too, as the days
Increase on her.”

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Then said the man :
“ Get speech from her, for sure she can
Tell somewhat of her life and state.”

But whatso he or his vile mate
Might do, no word at all she spake
Either for threat or promise sake ;
Until at last they deemed that she
Was tongue-tied : so now presently
Unto the homestead was she brought,
And her array all golden-wrought
Stripped from her, and in rags of grey
Clad was she. But from light of day
The carl hid Heimir dead, and all
Into dull sodden life did fall.

SO with the twain abode the may,
Waxing in beauty day by day,
But ever as one tongue-tied was,
What thing soever came to pass ;
And needs the hag must call her Crow
“ A name,” she said, “ full good enow
For thee—my mother bore it erst.”
So lived the child that she was nursed
On little meat and plenteous blows ;
Yet nowise would she weep, but close
Would set her teeth thereat, and go
About what work she had to do,

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

And ever wrought most sturdily ;
Until at last she grew to be
More than a child. And now the place
That once had borne so dull a face
Grew well-nigh bright to look upon,
And whatso thing might shine there shone ;
Yea, all but her who brought about
That change therein—for, past all doubt,
Years bettered in nowise our hag,
And ever she said that any rag
Was good enough to clothe the Crow.
And still her hate did grow and grow
As Aslaug grew to womanhood ;
Oft would she sit in murderous mood
Long hours, with hand anigh a knife,
As Aslaug slept, all hate at strife
With greed within her ; yet withal
Something like fear of her did fall
Upon her heart, and heavy weighed
That awful beauty, that oft stayed
Her hand from closing on the hilt,
E'en more than thought of good things spilt.
Hard words and blows this scarce might stay,
For like the minutes of the day,
Not looked for, noted not when gone,
Were all such things unto the crone,
And, smitten or unsmitten, still
The Crow was swift to work her will.

In spring-tide of her seventeenth year,
On the hill-side the house anear

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Went Aslaug, following up her goats :
On such a day as when Love floats
Through the soft air unseen, to touch
Our hearts with longings overmuch
Unshapen into hopes, to make
All things seem fairer for the sake
Of that which cometh, who doth bear
Who knows how much of grief and fear
In his fair arms. So Aslaug went,
On vague and unnamed thoughts intent,
That seemed to her full sweet enow,
And ever greater hope did grow,
And sweet seemed life to her and good,
Small reason why : into the wood
She turned, and wandered slim and fair
'Twixt the dark tree-boles : strange and rare
The sight was of her golden head,
So good, uncoifed, unchapleted,
Above her sordid dark array,
That over her fair body lay
As dark clouds on a lilied hill.
The wild things well might gaze their fill,
As through the wind-flowers brushed her feet,
As her lips smiled when those did meet
The lush-cold blue-bells, or were set
Light on the pale dog-violet
Late April bears : the red-throat jay
Screamed not for nought, as on her way
She went, light laughing at some thought ;
If the dove moaned 'twas not for nought,
Since she was gone too soon from him,

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

And e'en the sight he had was dim
For the thick budding twigs. At last
Into an open space she passed,
Nigh filled with a wide, shallow lake,
Amidmost which the fowl did take
Their pastime ; o'er the firmer grass,
'Twixt rushy ooze, swift did she pass,
Until upon a bank of sand
Close to the water did she stand,
And gazed down in that windless place
Upon the image of her face,
And as she gazed laughed musically
Once and again ; nor heeded she
Her straying flock : her voice, that none
Had heard since Heimir was undone
Within that wretched stead, began
Such speech as well had made a man
Forget his land and kin to make
Those sweet lips tremble for his sake :

“ Spring bringeth love,” she said, “ to all.”
She sighed as those sweet sounds did fall
From her unkissed lips : “ Ah,” said she,
“ How came that sweet word unto me,
Among such wretched folk who dwell,
Folk who still seem to carry hell
About with them ?—That ancient man
They slew, with whom my life began,
I deem he must have taught me that,
And how the steel-clad maiden sat
Asleep within the ring of flame,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Asleep, and waiting till Love came,
Who was my father : many a dream
I dream thereof, till it doth seem
That they will fetch me hence one day,
Somewhere I deem life must be gay.
The flowers are wrought not for the sake
Of those two murderers."

While she-spake

Her hands were busy with her gown,
And at the end it slipped adown
And left her naked there and white
In the unshadowed noontide light.
Like Freyia in her house of gold,
A while her limbs did she behold
Clear mirrored in the lake beneath ;
Then slowly, with a shuddering breath,
Stepped in the water cold, and played
Amid the ripple that she made,
And spoke again aloud, as though
The lone place of her heart might know :
"Soothly," she said, "if I knew fear,
Scarcely should I be sporting here,
But blinder surely has the crone
In those last months of winter grown,
Nor knows if I be foul or sweet,
Or sharp stripes might I chance to meet,
As heretofore it hath been seen
When I have dared to make me clean
Amid their foulness : loathes her heart
That one she hates should have a part
In the world's joy.—Well, time wears by,

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

I was not made for misery.
Surely if dimly do mine eyes
Behold no sordid tale arise,
No ill life drawing near—who knows
But I am kept for greater woes,
Godlike despair that makes not base,
Though like a stone may grow the face
Because of it, yea, and the heart
A hard-wrought treasure set apart
For the world's glory?"

Therewith she
Made for the smooth bank leisurely,
And, naked as she was, did pass
Unto the warm and flowery grass
All unashamed, and fearing not
For aught that should draw nigh the spot:
And soothly had some hunter been
Near by and all her beauty seen,
He would have deemed he saw a fay
And hastened trembling on his way.
But when full joyance she had had
Of sun and flowers, her limbs she clad
In no long time, forsooth, and then
Called back her wandering flock again
With one strange dumb cry, e'en as though
Their hearts and minds she needs must know,
For hurrying back with many a bleat
They huddled round about her feet.
And back she went unto the stead,
Strange visions pressing round her head,
So light of heart and limb, that though

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

She went with measured steps and slow,
Each yard seemed but a dance to her.

So now the thick wood did she clear,
And o'er the bent beheld the sea,
And stood amazed there suddenly,
For a long ship, with shield-hung rail,
And fair-stained flapping raven-sail,
And golden dragon-stem, there lay
On balanced oars amidst the bay,
Slow heaving with the unrippled swell.
With a strange hope she might not tell
Her eyes ran down the strand, and there
Lay beached a ship's boat painted fair,
And on the shingle by her side
Three blue-clad axemen did abide
Their fellows, sent belike ashore
To gather victuals for their store.

She looked not long ; with heart that beat
More quickly and with hurrying feet
Unto the homestead did she pass,
And when anigh the door she was
She heard men's voices deep and rough ;
Then the shrill crone, who said, " Enough
Of work I once had done for you,
But now my days left are but few
And I am weak ; I prithee wait,
Already now the noon is late,
My daughter, Crow, shall soon be here."
" Nay," said a shipman, " have no fear,

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

Goodwife, a speedy death to get,
Thou art a sturdy carline yet:
Howbeit we well may wait a while."

Thereat Aslaug, with a strange smile,
Fresh from that water in the wood,
Pushed back the crazy door, and stood
Upon the threshold silently;
Bareheaded and barefoot was she,
And scarce her rags held each to each,
Yet did the shipmen stay their speech
And open-mouthed upon her stare,
As with bright eyes and face flushed fair
She stood; one gleaming lock of gold,
Strayed from her fair head's plaited fold,
Fell far below her girdlestead,
And round about her shapely head
A garland of dog-violet
And wind-flowers meetly had she set:
They deemed it little scathe indeed
That her coarse homespun ragged weed
Fell off from her round arms and lithe
Laid on the door-post, that a withe
Of willows was her only belt;
And each as he gazed at her felt
As some gift had been given him.

At last one grumbled, "Nowise dim
It is to see, goodwife, that this
No branch of thy great kinship is."

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Grima was glaring on the may,
And scarce for rage found words to say,
“ Yea, soothly is she of our kin :
Sixty-five winters changeth skin.
And whatsoever she may be,
Though she is dumb as a dead tree,
She worketh ever double-tide.
So, masters, ope your mealsacks wide
And fall to work ; enow of wood
There is, I trow.”

And there she stood,
Shaking all o'er, and when the may
Brushed past her going on her way,
From off the board a knife she caught,
And well-nigh had it in her thought
To end it all. Small heed the men
Would take of her, forsooth ; and when
They turned their baking-work to speed,
And Aslaug fell the meal to knead,
He was the happiest of them all
Unto whose portion it did fall
To take the loaves from out her hand ;
And gaping often would he stand,
And ever he deemed that he could feel
A trembling all along the peel
Whenas she touched it—sooth to say,
Such bread as there was baked that day
Was never seen : such as it was
The work was done, and they did pass
Down toward the ship, and as they went
A dull place seemed the thymy bent,

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

Gilded by sunset ; the fair ship,
That soft in the long swell did dip
Her golden dragon, seemed nought worth,
And they themselves, all void of mirth,
Stammering and blundering in their speech,
Still looking back, seemed each to each
Ill-shapen, ugly, rough and base
As might be found in any place.

Well, saith the tale, and when the bread
Was broken, just as light as lead
Men found the same, as sweet as gall,
Half-baked and sodden ; one and all
Men gave it to the devil ; at last
Unto their lord the story passed,
Who called for them, and bade them say
Why they had wrought in such a way ;
They grinned and stammered, till said one :
“ We did just e'en as must be done
When men are caught ; had it been thou
A-cold had been the oven now.”

“ Ye deal in riddles,” said the lord,
“ Enough brine is there overboard
To fill you full if even so
Ye needs must have it.”

“ We did go,”
The man said, “ to a house, and found
That lack of all things did abound ;
A yellow-faced and blear-eyed crone
Was in the sooty hall alone ;

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

But as we talked with her, and she
Spake to us ill and craftily,
A wondrous scent was wafted o'er
The space about the open door,
And all the birds drew near to sing,
And summer pushed on into spring,
Until there stood before our eyes
A damsel clad in wretched guise,
Yet surely of the gods I deem,
So fair she was ;—well then this dream
Of Freyia on midsummer night,
This breathing love, this once-seen sight,
Flitted amidst us kneading meal,
And from us all the wits did steal ;—
Hadst thou been wise ? ”

“ Well,” said the lord,
“ This seemeth but an idle word ;
Yet since ye all are in one tale
Somewhat to you it may avail—
Speak out ! my lady that is dead—
Thora, the chief of goodlihead—
Came this one nigh to her at all ? ”

One answer from their mouths did fall,
That she was fairest ever seen.
“ If two such marvellous things have been
Wrought by the gods, then have they wrought
Exceeding well,” the lord said ; “ nought
Will serve me now but to have sight
Of her, and hear the fresh delight
Of her sweet voice.”

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

“Nay, nay,” one cried,
“The carline called the maid tongue-tied
E’en from her birth.”

But thoughtfully
The lord spake: “Then belike shall be
Some wonder in the thing. Lo now,
Since I, by reason of my vow
Made on the cup at Yule, no more
May set foot upon any shore
Till I in Micklegarth have been,
And somewhat there of arms have seen,
Go ye at earliest morn and say
That I would see her ere the day
Is quite gone by; here shall she come
And go as if her father’s home
The good ship were, and I indeed
Her very brother. Odin speed
The matter in some better wise,
Unless your words be nought but lies!”

So the next morn she had the word
To come unto their king and lord;
She answered not, but made as though
Their meaning she did fully know,
And gave assent: the crone was there,
And still askance at her did glare,
And midst her hatred grew afeard
Of what might come, but spoke no word;
And ye may well believe indeed
That those men gave her little heed,
But stared at Aslaug as she stood

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Beside the greasy, blackened wood
Of the hall's uprights, fairer grown
Than yesterday, soft 'neath her gown
Her fair breast heaving, her wide eyes
Mid dreams of far-off things grown wise,
The rock dropped down in her left hand ;—
There mazed awhile the men did stand,
Then gat them back. And so the sun
Waxed hot and waned, and, day nigh done,
Gleamed on the ship's side as she lay
Close in at deepest of the bay,
Her bridge gold-hung on either hand
Cast out upon the hard white sand ;
While o'er the bulwarks many a man
Gazed forth ; and the great lord began
To fret and fume, till on the brow
Of the low cliff they saw her now,
Who stood a moment to behold
The ship's sun-litten flashing gold ;
Then slowly 'gan to get her down
A steep path in the sea-cliff brown,
Till on a sudden did she meet
The slant sun cast about its feet,
And flashed as in a golden cloud ;
Since scarcely her poor raiment showed
Beneath the glory of her hair,
Whose last lock touched her ankles bare.

For so it was that as she went
Unto this meeting, all intent
Upon the time that was to be,

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

While yet just hidden from the sea,
She stayed her feet a little while,
And, gazing on her raiment vile,
Flushed red, and muttered,—

“Who can tell
But I may love this great lord well?
An evil thing then should it be
If he cast loathing eyes on me
This first time for my vile attire.”

Then, while her cheek still burned like fire,
She set hand to her hair of gold
Until its many ripples rolled
All over her, and no great queen
Was e'er more gloriously beseen;
And thus she went upon her way.

Now when the crew beheld the may
Set foot upon the sand there rose
A mighty shout from midst of those
Rough seafarers; only the lord
Stood silent gazing overboard
With great eyes, till the bridge she gained,
And still the colour waxed and waned
Within his face; but when her foot
First pressed the plank, to his heart's root
Sweet pain there pierced, for her great eyes
Were fixed on his in earnest wise,
E'en as her thoughts were all of him;
And somewhat now all things waxed dim,
As unto her he stretched his hand,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And felt hers ; and the twain did stand
Hearkening each other's eager breath.
But she was changed, for pale as death
She was now as she heard his voice.

“ Full well may we this eve rejoice,
Fair maid, that thou hast come to us ;
That this grey shore and dolorous
Holds greater beauty than the earth
Mid fairer days may bring to birth,
And that I hold it now. But come
Unto the wind-blown woven home,
Where I have dwelt alone awhile,
And with thy speech the hours beguile.”

For nothing he remembered
Of what his men unto him said,
That she was dumb. Not once she turned
Her eyes from his ; the low sun burned
Within her waving hair, as she
Unto the poop went silently
Beside him, and with faltering feet,
Because this hour seemed over sweet,
And still his right hand held her hand.

But when at last the twain did stand
Beneath the gold-hung tilt alone,
He said, “ Thou seemest such an one
As who could love ; thou look'st on me
As though thou hopedst love might be
Betwixt us—thou art pale, my sweet,
Good were it if our lips should meet.”

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

Then mouth to mouth long time they stood,
And when they sundered the red blood
Burnt in her cheek, and tenderly
Trembled her lips, and drew anigh
His lips again : but speech did break
Swiftly from out them, and she spake :
“May it be so, fair man, that thou
Art even no less happy now
Than I am.”

With a joyous cry
He caught her to him hastily ;
And mid that kiss the sun went down,
And colder was the dark world grown.
Once more they parted ; “Ah, my love,”
He said, “I knew not aught could move
My heart to such joy as thy speech.”

She made as if she fain would reach
Her lips to his once more ; but ere
They touched, as smitten by new fear,
She drew aback and said : “Alas !
It darkens, and I needs must pass
Back to the land, to be more sad
Than if this joy I ne’er had had.
And thou—thou shalt be sorry too,
And pity me that it is so.”

“To-morrow morn comes back the day,”
He said, “if we should part, sweet may :
Yet why should I be left forlorn
Betwixt this even and the morn ?”

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

His hand had swept aback her hair,
And on her shoulder, gleaming bare
From midst her rags, was trembling now ;
But she drew back, and o'er her brow
Gathered a troubled thoughtful frown,
And on the bench she sat her down
And spake : " Nay, it were wise to bide
Awhile. Behold, the world is wide,
Yet have we found each other here,
And each to other seems more dear
Than all the world else.—Yet a king
Thou art, and I am such a thing,
By some half-dreamed-of chance cast forth
To live a life of little worth,
A lonely life—and it may be
That thou shouldst weary soon of me
If I abode here now—and I,
How know I? All unhappily
My life has gone ; scarce a kind word
Except in dreams my ears have heard
But those thy lovely lips have said :
It might be when all things were weighed
That I too light of soul should prove
To hold for ever this great love."

Down at her feet therewith he knelt,
And round her his strong arms she felt
Drawing her to him, as he said :
" These are strange words for thee, O maid ;
Are those sweet loving lips grown cold
So soon? Yet art thou in my hold,

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

And certainly my heart is hot.
What help against me hast thou got?"

Each unto each their cheeks were laid,
As in a trembling voice she said :
"No help, because so dear to me
Thou art, and mighty as may be ;
Thou hast seen much, art wiser far
Than I am ; yet strange thoughts there are
In my mind now—some half-told tale
Stirs in me, if I might avail
To tell it."

Suddenly she rose,
And thrust him from her ; "Ah, too close !
Too close now, and too far apart
To-morrow !—and a barren heart,
And days that ever fall to worse,
And blind lives struggling with a curse
They cannot grasp ! Look on my face,
Because I deem me of a race
That knoweth such a tale too well.
Yet if there be such tale to tell
Of us twain, let it e'en be so,
Rather than we should fail to know
This love—ah me, my love forbear !
No pain for thee and me I fear ;
Yet strive we e'en for more than this !
Thou who hast given me my first bliss
To-day, forgive me, that in turn
I see the pain within thee burn,
And may not help—because mine eyes

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

The gods make clear. I am grown wise
With gain of love, and hope of days
That many a coming age shall praise."

Awhile he gazed on her, and shook
With passion, and his cloak's hem took
With both hands as to rend it down ;
Yet from his brow soon cleared the frown :
He said : " Yea, such an one thou art,
As needs alone must fill my heart
If I be like my father's kin,
And have a hope great deeds to win ;
And surely nought shall hinder me
From living a great life with thee—
Say now what thou wouldst have me do."

"Some deed of fame thou goest to,"
She said, "for surely thou art great ;
Go on thy way then, and if fate
So shapen is, that thou mayst come
Once more unto this lonely home,
There shalt thou find me, who will live
Through whatso days that fate may give,
Till on some happy coming day
Thine oars again make white the bay."

"If that might be remembered now,"
He said, "last Yule I made a vow
In some far land to win me fame.
Come nigher, sweet, and hear my name
Before thou goest ; that if so be

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

Death take me and my love from thee,
Thou mayst then think of who I was,
Nor let all memory of me pass
When thou to some great king art wed :
Then shalt thou say, 'Ragnar is dead,
Who was the son of Sigurd Ring,
Among the Danes a mighty king.
He might have had me by his side,'
Then shalt thou say, 'that hour he died ;
But my heart failed and not his heart.'"

"Nay, make it not too hard to part,"
She said, when once again their lips
Had sundered ; "as gold-bearing ships
Foundered amidmost of the sea,
So shall the loves of most men be,
And leave no trace behind. God wot
This heart of mine shall hate thee not
Whatso befall ; but rather bless
Thee and this hour of happiness ;
And if this tide shall come again
After hard longing and great pain,
How sweet, how sweet ! O love, farewell,
Lest other tale there be to tell :
Yet heed this now lest afterward
It seem to thee a thing too hard
To keep thy faith to such as me ;
I am belike what thou dost see,
A goatherd girl, a peasant maid,
Of a poor wretched crone afraid
From dawn to dusk ; despite of dreams

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

In morning tides, and misty gleams
Of wondrous stories, deem me such
As I have said, nor overmuch
Cast thou thy love upon my heart
If even such a man thou art
As needs must wed a great man's child."

He stepped aback from her and smiled,
And, stooping 'neath the lamp, drew forth
From a great chest a thing of worth—
A silken sark wrought wondrously
In some far land across the sea.
"One thing this is of many such
That I were fain thy skin should touch,"
He said, "if thou wouldst have it so."
But his voice faltered and sank low,
As though her great heart he 'gan fear.
She reached her fine strong hand anear
The far-fetched thing; then smiling said:
"Strange that such fair things can be made
By men who die; and like it is
Thou think'st me worthy of all bliss;
But our rough hills and smoky house
Befit not aught so glorious,
E'en if thou come again to me;
And if not, greater grief to see
The gifts of dead love!—what say I,
Our crone should wear these certainly
If I but brought them unto land."

He flushed red, and his strong right hand
Fell to his sword-hilt. "Nay," she said,

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

“All that is nought if rightly weighed ;
Hope and desire shall pass the days
If thou come back.”

Grave was her face
And tremulous : he sighed ; “Then take
This last gift only for my sake.”
And once again their lips did touch
And cling together. “O many such,”
She said, “if the time did not fail,
And my heart too : of what avail
Against the hand of fate to strive ?
Let me begin my life to live,
As it must be a weary space.”

The moon smote full upon her face,
As on a trembling sea, as now
From the lamp-litten gold tilt low
She stepped into the fresher air,
He with her. Slow the twain did fare
Amidst the wondering men, till they
Had reached the bridge ; then swift away
She turned, and passed the gold-hung rail,
And o'er the sands the moon made pale
Went gleaming, all alone : and he
Watched till her light feet steadily
Stepped up upon the dark cliff's brow :
But no one time she turned her now,
But vanished from him into night.
So there he watched till changing light
Brought the beginning of the tide
Of longing that he needs must bide ;

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Then he cried out for oars and sail,
And ere the morning star did fail
No more those cliffs his bird beheld,
As 'neath the wind the broad sail swelled.

BUT for the maiden, back she went
Unto the stead, and her intent
She changed in nought : no word she spake
What wrath so'er on her might break
From the fell crone, on whom withal
Still heavier did that strange awe fall ;
As well might be, for from the may
Had girlish lightness passed away
Into a sweet grave majesty,
That scarce elsewhere the world might see.

So wore the spring, and summer came,
And went, and all the woods did flame
With autumn, as in that old tide
When slowly by the mirk hill-side
Went Heimir to his unseen death :
Then came the first frost's windless breath,
The steaming sea, the world all white,
And glittering morn and silent night,
As when the little one first felt
The world a-cold ; and still she dwelt
Unchanged since that first spark of love
Wrought the great change, that so did move

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

Her heart to perfect loveliness.
Nor overmuch did the days press
Upon her with the weary waste
Of short life, that too quick doth haste
When joy is gained : if any thought
Thereof unto her heart was brought,
Rather it was, " Ah, over-long
For brooding over change and wrong
When that shall come ! Good gain to me
My love's eyes one more time to see,
To feel once more his lips' delight,
And die with the short summer night,
Not shamed nor sorry ! But if I
Must bear the weight of misery
In the after days, yet even then
May I not leave to unborn men
A savour of sweet things, a tale
That midst all woes shall yet prevail
To make the world seem something worth ?'

So passed the winter of the North,
And once again was come the spring ;
Then whiles would she go loitering
Slow-footed, and with hanging head,
Through budding brake, o'er flowery mead,
With blood that throbbed full quickly now
If o'er the flowers her feet were slow,
And bonds about her seemed to be.
Yet wore the spring-tide lingeringly
Till on a morn of latter May,
When her soft sleep had passed away,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Nought but the bright-billed sweet-throat bird
Within the thorn at first she heard ;
But, even as her heart did meet
The first wave of desire o'ersweet,
The winding of a mighty horn
Adown the breeze of May was borne,
And throbbing hope on her did fall :
Yet from her bed she leapt withal,
And clad herself, and went about
Her work, as though with ne'er a doubt
That this day e'en such like should be
As was the last ; and so while she
Quickened the fire and laid the board,
Mid the crone's angry, peevish word
Of surly wonder, the goodman,
With axe on shoulder, swiftly ran
Adown the slope ; but presently
Came breathless back :

“ Ah, here they be !
Come back again for something worse,”
Said he. “ This dumb maid is some curse
Laid on us.”

“ Well,” the goodwife said,
“ Who be they ? ” “ They who baked their bread
Within this house last spring,” said he.
“ Oft did I marvel then why she,
This witch-maid, went unto the strand
That eve.”

“ Nay, maybe comes to hand
Some luck,” the crone said. “ Hold thy peace,”
He said. “ What goodhap or increase

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

From that ill night shall ever come?
Rather I deem that now come home
Those fifteen years of murder: lo,
The worst of all we soon shall know,
I hear their voices."

Silently,
If somewhat pale, Aslaug passed by
From fire to board, as though she heard
And noted nothing of that word,
Whate'er it was: yet now, indeed,
The clink of sword on iron weed,
And voices of the seafarers,
Came clear enow unto her ears;
Nor was it long or e'er the door
Was darkened, as one stood before
The light and cried:

"Hail to this house,
If here still dwells the glorious
Fair maiden, that across the seas
We come for!"

Aslaug on her knees
Knelt by the brightening fire and dropped
The meal into the pot, nor stopped
For all their words, but with her hand
Screened her fair face. Then up did stand
The goodman, quaking:

"Well," he said,
"Good be my meed! for we have red
This dumb maid all for kindness' sake."

"No need," he said, "long words to make,
And little heed we thy lies now,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

But if she doom thee to the bough.
—All hail, our Lady and our Queen ! ”

For she, arisen, with glorious mien
Was drawing near the board, and bare
The porridge-bowl and such-like gear
Past where the men stood ; tremblingly
The leader of them drew anigh,
And would have taken them, but she
Swerved from his strong hand daintily,
Smiled on him and passed by, and when
They were set down turned back again
And spoke, and well then might rejoice
That dusky place to hear her voice
For the first time :

“ I doubt me not,
O seafarers, but ye have got
A message from that goodly lord
Who spake last year a pleasant word,
Hard to believe for a poor maid.”

Trembled the twain at what she said
Less than the unexpected sound,
For death seemed in the air around.
But the man spake : “ E’en thus he saith,
That he, who heretofore feared death
In no-wise, feared this morn to come
And seek thee out in thy poor home,
Lest he should find thee dead or gone ;
For scarce he deemed so sweet a one
Could be for him : ‘ But if she live,’

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

He said, 'and still her love can give
To me, let her make no delay,
For fear we see no other day
Wherein to love.' "

She said: "Come, then!
It shames me not that of all men
I love him best. But have ye there
Somewhat these twain might reckon dear?
Their life is ill enow to live
But that withal they needs must strive
With griping want when I am gone."

He answered, "O thou goodly one,
Here have we many a dear-bought thing
Because our master bade us bring
All queenly gear for thee, and deems
That thou, so clad as well beseems
That lovely body, wouldst aboard;
But all we have is at thy word
To keep or spend."

"Nay, friends," she said,
"If thy lord loves my goodlihead,
Fain would I bear alone to him
What wealth I have of face or limb,
For him to deck when all is his,
So full enow shall even this
That I am dight with be for me;
But since indeed of his bounty
He giveth unto me to give—
Take ye this gold, ye twain, and live
E'en as ye may—small need to bless

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Or curse your sordid churlishness,
Because methinks, without fresh curse,
Each day that comes shall still be worse
Than the past day, and worst of all
Your ending day on you shall fall.
Yet, if it may be, fare ye well,
Since in your house I came to dwell
Some wearing of my early days."

E'en as she spake, her glorious face
Shone the last time on that abode,
And her light feet the daisies trod
Outside the threshold. But the twain
Stood 'mazed above the bounteous gain
Of rings and gems and money bright,
And a long while, for mere affright
And wonder, durst not handle it.

But while the butterfly did flit
White round about the feet of her,
Above the little May-flowers fair,
She went adown the hill with these,
Until the low wash of the seas
They heard, and murmuring of the men
Who manned the long-ships; quickly then
They showed above the grey bent's brow,
And all the folk beheld them now
'Twixt oar and gunwale that abode,
And to the sky their shout rose loud.
But when upon the beach she came,
A bright thing in the sun did flame

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

'Twixt sun and ship-side, and the sea
Foamed, as one waded eagerly
Unto the smooth and sea-beat sand,
And for one moment did she stand
Breathless, with beating heart, and then
To right and left drew back the men ;
She heard a voice she deemed well known,
Long waited through dull hours bygone,
And round her mighty arms were cast :
But when her trembling red lips passed
From out the heaven of that dear kiss,
And eyes met eyes, she saw in his
Fresh pride, fresh hope, fresh love, and saw
The long sweet days still onward draw,
Themselves still going hand in hand,
As now they went adown the strand.

NEXT morn, when they awoke to see
Each other's hands draw lovingly
Each unto each, awhile they lay
Silent, as though night passed away
They grudged full sore : till the King said
Unto the happy golden head
That lay upon his breast, " What thought
By those few hours of dark was brought
Unto thy heart, my love ? Did dreams
Make strange thy loving sleep with gleams
Of changing days that yet may be ? "

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

She answered, but still dreamily :
“ In sleep a little while ago
O’er a star-litten world of snow
I fared, till suddenly near by
A swirling fire blazed up on high ;
Thereto I went, and without scathe
Passed through the flame, as one doth bathe
Within a summer stream, and there
I saw a golden palace fair
Ringed round about with roaring flame.
Unto an open door I came,
And entered a great hall thereby,
And saw where ’neath a canopy
A King and Queen there sat, more fair
Than the world knoweth elsewhere :
And much methought my heart smiled then
Upon that goodliest of all men,
That sweetest of all womankind.
Then one methought a horn did wind
Without, and the King turned and spake :

“ ‘ Wherewith do the hall pillars shake,
O Queen, O love ? ’ ”

She moved her head,
And in a voice like music said :
‘ This is the fame of Ragnar’s life,
The breath of all the glorious strife
Wherewith his days shall wear.’

Then he :

‘ What is the shadow that I see
Adown the hall ? ’

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

Then said the Queen :
‘ Our daughter surely hadst thou seen
If thine eyes saw as clear as mine :
Well worth she is our love divine,
And unto Ragnar is she wed,
The best man since that thou art dead,
My King, my love, mine own, mine own.’

“ Then the twain kissed upon the throne,
And the dream passed and sleep passed too.”

Therewith the King her body drew
Nearer to him, if it might be,
And spake : “ A strange dream came to me.
Upon a waste at dawn I went
And wandered over vale and bent,
And ever was it dawn of day,
And still upon all sides there lay
The bones of men, and war-gear turned
To shards and rust ; then far off burned
A fire, and thither quick I passed.
And when I came to it at last
Dreadful it seemed, impassable ;
But I, fain of that land to tell
What things soever might be known,
Went round about, and up and down,
And gat no passing by the same ;
Until, methought, just where the flame
Burned highest, through the midst I saw
A man and woman toward me draw,
Even as through a flowery wood :

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

So came they unto where I stood,
And glad at heart therewith I grew,
For such fair folk as were the two
Ne'er had I seen; then the man cried :

“ ‘ Hail to thee, Ragnar ! well betide
This dawn of day. Stretch forth thine hand.’

“ E'en as he bade me did I stand,
Abiding what should hap, but he
Turned to the woman lovingly,
And from her bosom's fresh delight
Drew forth a blooming lily white,
And set it in mine hand, and then
Both through the flame went back again.

“ Then afterwards in earth I set
This lily, and with soft regret
Watched for its fading ; but withal
Great light upon the world did fall,
And fair the sun rose o'er the earth,
And blithe I grew and full of mirth :
And no more on a waste I was,
But in a green world, where the grass
White lily-blooms well-nigh did hide ;
O'er hill and valley far and wide
They waved in the warm wind ; the sun
Seemed shining upon everyone,
As though it loved it : and with that
I woke, and up in bed I sat
And saw thee waking, O my sweet ! ”

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

With that last word their lips did meet,
And even the fresh May morning bright
Was noted not in their delight.

Let be—as ancient stories tell
Full knowledge upon Ragnar fell
In lapse of time, that this was she
Begot in the felicity
Swift-fleeting of the wondrous twain,
Who afterwards through change and pain
Must live apart to meet in death.

But, would ye know what the tale saith,
In the old Danish tongue is writ
Full many a word concerning it,—
The days through which these lovers passed,
Till death made end of all at last.
But so great Ragnar's glory seemed
To Northern folk, that many deemed
That for his death, when song arose
From that Northumbrian Adder-close,
England no due atonement paid
Till Harald Godwinson was laid
Beside his fallen banner, cold
Upon the blood-soaked Sussex mould,
And o'er the wrack of Senlac field
Full-fed the grey-nebbed raven wheeled.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

I N the dim place that the sun knew no more
He rose up when his tale was fully o'er,
And 'gan to pace the long hall to and fro
With old eyes looking downward, e'en as though
None else were there : at last with upraised face
He walked back swiftly to his fire-lit place,
And sat him down, and turned to the young folk
Smiling perforce ; then from their lips outbroke
The murmuring speech his moody looks had stilled,
And with a sweet sound was the hall fulfilled ;
E'en like the noise that from the thin wood's side
Swims through the dawning day at April-tide
Across the speckled eggs, when from the brown
Soft feathers glittering eyes are looking down
Over the dewy meads, too fresh and fair
For aught but lovely feet to wander there.

Drag on, long night of winter, in whose heart,
Nurse of regret, the dead spring yet has part !
Drag on, O night of dreams ! O night of fears !
Fed by the summers of the bygone years !